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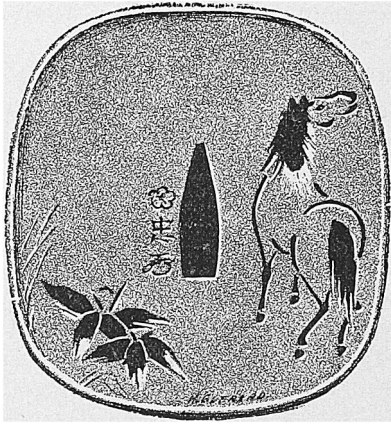
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THE SWORD OF JAPAN AND ITS ORNAMENTS

BY THE COUNTESS ANNIE DE MONTAIGU

With illustrations from notable examples of ancient sword-guards.



SIMPLEST FORM OF SWORD-GUARD (IRON):
BY OUMETADA, 17TH CENTURY

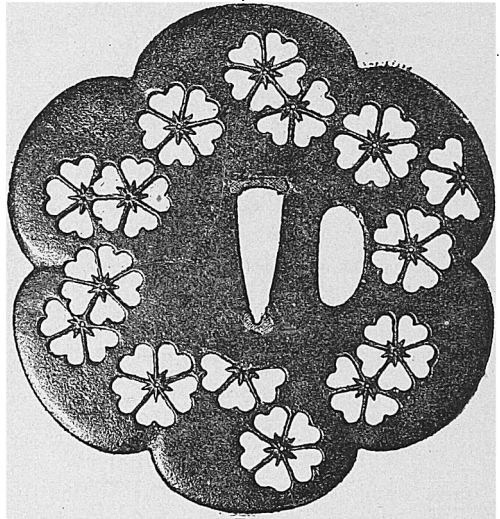
WHEN the reader recalls the fact that the ancient races of Japan were fierce and warlike, he can scarcely marvel that during the feudal ages, and up to the revolution of 1868, the armament of a warrior was his most precious possession. The lance and the bow were noble arms, but the sword outranked them.

Only nobles and high officials were permitted to wear the sword, which was often styled "the soul of the samurai," but this privilege was accorded even to boys of lordly parentage.

The far-famed blades of Toledo and Syria were clumsy as compared with those of old Japan, which, by a single deft stroke, would

sever a man's head in twain. The story of Saladin's feat of cutting a down-cushion in two with his scintillant blade, might well be credited by those acquainted with the Japanese weapon.

There was a time when a man's rank could be determined by the quality of his armature; a person magnificently garbed, with an ordinary weapon by his side, would be adjudged of low degree, while to a poorly dressed person wearing a fine sword, would be extended distinguished homage. A fortune was frequently invested in arms, a rich noble often possessing fifteen hundred swords, some of them costing \$1,400, and the daimios and wealthy nobles vied with each other in owning elegant specimens of the armorer's handicraft, many of which were ancient family heirlooms, and magnificent examples of the cunning workmanship of the artist-artisan. The profession of the armorer was esteemed a most honorable one, in the medieval society of Japan, and often a skillful artificer was ennobled by the emperor. The polishing and finishing of a blade was a long and tedious process, and prior to giving the final touches, the master-armorer was accustomed to don his court-suit in token of the profound



AN IRON OPEN-WORK GUARD WITH AN APERTURE FOR
THE KO-DZOUKA: 16TH CENTURY

respect in which he held his calling. The signature of the armorer was always appended to a sword of superior workmanship, as may be seen by an examination of the fine series of these weapons possessed by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The gods were presumed to preside over the forging of weapons; propitiatory offerings to the bloodthirsty deity of war, the terrible Bishamon, were made in the workshop and his image was sometimes engraved upon the blade. The sword was thought to be endowed with miraculous virtues, and the superstitious believed

that in its trenchant blade was enshrined the spirit of a beneficent divinity, who guided the warrior's arm in battle and shielded him from danger.

Legends were sometimes engraved upon the hilt, such as: "Our destiny is in the hands of the gods, but a skillful swordsman need not fear death," which liberally interpreted might be construed into the Cromwellian motto, "Trust in God but keep your powder dry." Another characteristic motto runs: "There is nothing on earth or in heaven that a man who wears a trusty blade need fear."

The etiquette of wearing the sword was formal and explicit, and every Japanese of rank made a careful study of it: there were those appropriate for war and others which were only to be worn on ceremonial parades, and at courtly functions.

The primitive sabre of the country was called the *ken*, and was a ponderous two-edged weapon, more than a yard long, which was hung upon the back and brandished with both hands. The *kutana* was a shorter sword about eighteen inches in length, which was worn in the girdle and was the conventional arm of the gentleman, and the one which rendered him master of the situation, for in case of misfortune or disgrace he could, by

means of it, spare himself the ignominy of a public execution by resorting to the suicidal duty of *hara-kiri*. The *kutana* was usually ornamented in the most costly manner, and while it bears the semblance of an elegant toy, is in reality a most dangerous weapon.

While the warrior regarded the temper of his trusty blade as of paramount importance, the art-lover, the collector and the wealthy noble have had an eye to its decoration. Rich men now, as of old, compete with each other for the possession of magnificent specimens of the ancient artist-armorer's handicraft,



A JAPANESE WARRIOR IN NATIVE ARMOR
AND ACCOUTERMENTS

and pay exorbitant prices for them. *Tsuka*, the hilt, *saya*, the sheath, and *tsuba*, the guard, all came in for a fair share of ornamentation. The sheath was commonly made of magnolia wood, either carved or protected by lacquer, and often elaborated with a tracery of precious metals or inlaid with nacre. Sometimes the case was covered with shark-skin, or it was of unrelieved severity, showing merely a polished surface of lacquer having the tip fortified with metal, either plain, engraved or embossed.

The hilt was usually of the finest workmanship, and generally covered with braided silk, through whose meshes appeared the gold or silver ornaments called the *menoukis*. Next the blade comes the oval guard (*tsuba*).

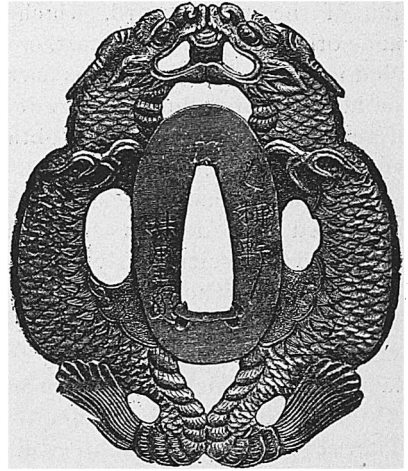
In the handle are two slots through which a strong and broad cord of plaited silk is passed, the two halves connecting on the arched side and intersecting with each other. On the reverse side is a stout ring or hook of metal through which the cord is threaded. This cord the wearer would wind firmly about his wrist when in battle.

The *tsuba*, or sword-guard, is as old in history as the sword, and was its most important accessory, since it alone protected the warrior's hand; and upon its embellishment the armorer, the engraver, and the goldsmith expended their best efforts. Hence each example that remains is an artistic and individual production. This guard or shell, many style of which are illustrated herewith, consists of a disk of metal, not soldered to the steel, but only slipped over the blade and made fast to the hilt, which was provided with one, two, or three oval apertures

through which the side-arms were thrust. The sword occupied the place of honor in the middle slot; on one or both sides was the *ko-dzuka*, a small sharp-pointed knife whose blade reposed in an outer furrow of the scabbard. When a single *ko-dzuka* was carried, an iron hair-pin designated *koghai* was slipped through the other aperture.

This *koghai* was a highly useful implement. It fastened the cap of the soldier, was used as a fork to pick up grains of rice at meals; and in the course of battle was stuck into the body of a dead foe to lay claim to its possession.

The artificers in metals devoted much time and talent to the elabora-



SILVER-BRONZE, DRAGONS AFFRONTE:
BY SEIDOUZI



HAMMERED IRON, ENCRUSTED WITH SILVER:
BY YOUSAN

tion of the sword-guard, which was made originally of forged, cast, or chiselled iron, to which metal was ascribed the highest honor during the rude ages of feudalism ; the relief was obtained with the hammer.

The most renowned artists often originated the designs for guards, which were conscientiously carried out by the artisan, who by his persevering care was enabled to impart life and action to the most unyielding materials, some of which are as adamant as steel ; and the Japanese metal-work of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries challenges comparison with that of Pisaniello and Benvenuto Cellini.

About the beginning of the eighteenth century, soft alloys, composed of variously colored metals, came into use, and their employment resulted not only in an increased facility of manipulation, but in an infinite variety of form and color among the objects made. Two of these are frequently alluded to by writers under their Japanese names, *shakoudo* and *shibouitshi*. *Shakoudo* is a gold bronze ; and the other a silver bronze ; but Gonse informs us that in each of these alloys the proportions of the metals varied according to the color the artist wished to obtain. The increase of ease in working these soft alloys, however, soon led to haste and carelessness and precipitated the decadence of Japanese art in metals.

In variety and beauty of color these old bronzes rivalled the palette of the painter, and permitted the imagination of the artist to revel in splendid tints as well as in exquisite forms. Although iron was not abandoned, it was used in conjunction with the ruddy and golden tones of the bronzes, with the addition of



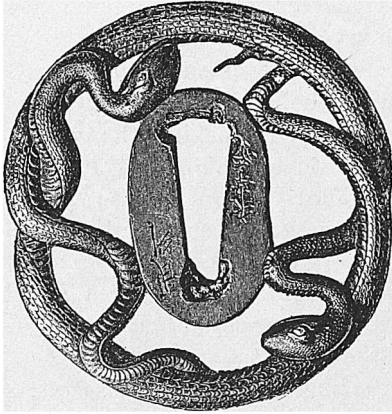
AN IRON GUARD OF THE 15TH CENTURY



IRON GUARD, CARP ENTWINED: BY YEIJIU

the rich greens and electric blues that afforded such magnificent possibilities to the decorator. Translucent enamels, with their jewel-like glints of color, were also lavishly employed. Incising, relief, inlaying, incrustation, and intaglio decoration, were all utilized by the Japanese artist in metal, together with filigree and damascening, the latter eclipsing in delicacy that of the Arabs and Moors.

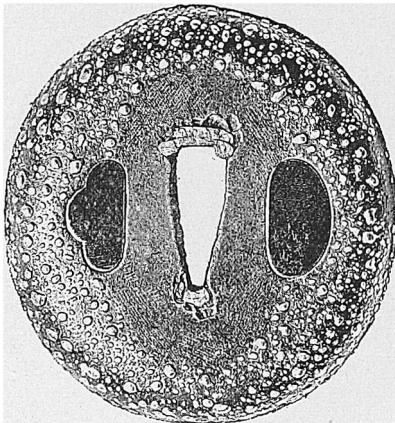
The native metal-worker was enabled to produce superb effects by his knowledge of methods of corrosion and oxidation. As many as seven metals in combination were occasionally employed in the depiction of a single subject, the tones so blended



A GOLD-BRONZE GUARD: BY NAGAYOUKI

be appreciated unless a magnifying glass is used.

The gods Imari and Bishamon, the patrons of war, are frequently portrayed. The armorial bearings of a family were often marked out upon the guard; and the kiku or chrysanthemum, the Imperial insignia of the regnant family, was placed upon the sword-shells of the emperor; and birds, insects and even quadrupeds were all utilized by these ingenious designers, as will be noticed in studying the pictures of the examples illustrated herewith. A taste for grotesque design is conspicuous, however; in fact, the artists of Japan reveal an inherent tendency toward caricature. Two interlaced serpents biting a lance was one of the favorite forms, as were also mythological monsters.

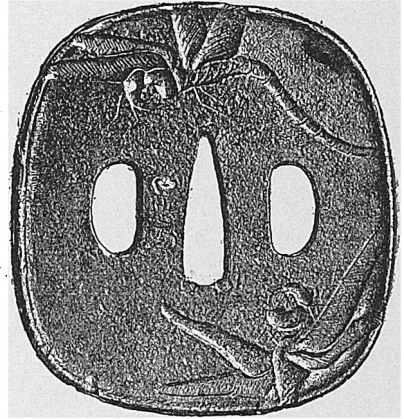


IRON ENCRUSTED WITH SILVER: BY NOBOUIVE, 17TH CENTURY

and harmonized as to present a poem in color.

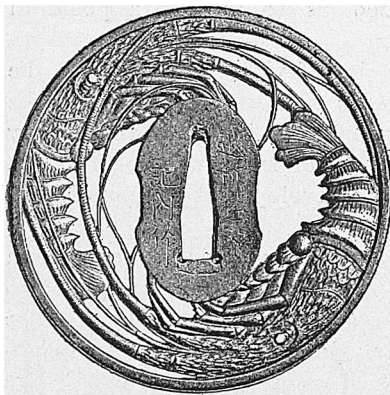
From the point of view of art, indeed, the guard is the piece of most importance in the whole garniture of the sabre; and the history of this department of metal-working forms a fair index of the development and progress of that art in Japan.

The designers drew their subjects from the fauna and flora of their country, and also from religious and mythical themes. The fecundity of imagination and the minute elaboration displayed upon these sword-shells are worthy of the efforts of the most renowned jewelers of Europe, and often their beauty cannot



AN IRON GUARD: WITH DRAGON-FLIES HOLLOWED OUT, BY OUMETADA

The most ancient name of an artist who worked in this line is that of Kanaiye, who wrought at the end of the fourteenth century, and his methods were pursued throughout the fifteenth century. Red and yellow bronzes were employed, in conjunction with gold and silver, in incrustations, and after the manner of cloisonné, with very beautiful effect. By the end of the sixteenth century the art of working in iron had realized an important progress, especially fostered and advanced in the studios of Taiko-Sama and Osaka. There appeared simultaneously, the fine damascening of gold and the applications of translucent enamels. An artist by the name of Kounishiro distinguished himself in this kind of work, of



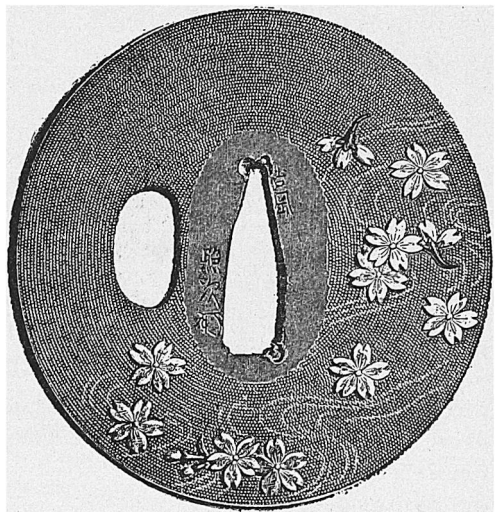
IRON OPEN-WORK, WITH RAISED PATTERN
IN GOLD: BY KINAI, 16TH CENTURY

which, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, marvellous examples were produced in Japan. The men who exerted the most early influence upon the delicate ornamentation of swords, and especially in making the guards, were Kinai of Etshizen, Shinkodo and Nobouiye (see page 249).

The name of Shinkodo engraved upon a sword-guard, greatly enhances its value, as he was one of the best-known workers in metal of his day. Nobouiye was another specialist, renowned for the grotesqueness of his conceptions, and the unparalleled boldness of his execution. Outemada was also an able exponent of the school of metal-workers, and devoted his talents to the manufacture of tsubas; he was of a sombre turn of thought, and his works are characterized by their strange and grotesque forms, but are always notable in execution. His signature was the plum-blossom and the character *tada*. Two pieces by this grandest artist of a past type celebrated in Japan, were found some time ago in a Parisian collection. One of these (shown on page 249) is ornamented with dragon-flies, in their wild, nocturnal aspect, hollowed out of the metal and curved over the border of the guard. In the other (shown on page 245) he represents, with remarkable art, a brush-like sketch; it is of a horse at liberty in the field, with his mane flying in the wind. All of his work is highly original, and as he employed the hardest metals they possess an almost everlasting durability.

Other masters of talent of this period were You San (see page 247), Mitsitoshi, Takouti, Tomokata, Yeijiu (see page 248), Kanenori, Tomoyouki and many others. The most illustrious of these was certainly Somin, whose masterpieces in silver are regarded as equal to those in iron by Oumetada. He died in 1717, and must not be confounded with a metal-worker of more recent career at the court of Japan having the same name.

The sword-guard is valued at the present time, not from a military point of view, but from that of the art-collector. Its mission is ended, as the sword is no longer the national weapon of Japan, the accouterments of the army now being those accepted by European nations. The rifle and bayonet are less picturesque but more effective than the sword, the wearing of which has been forbidden, even in court costume, since the rebellion of the nobles in 1868.



RED BRONZE: BY TEROUTSUGOU